Padang Besar in Malaysia. The Government of Malaysia has issued a formal Letter of Intent on 23rd August, 2001 to IRCON as follow up action on the MOU. The discussion on the technical and commercial aspects of the project are expected to take place around April, 2002.

Indian in foreign jails

*352. SHRI NANA DESHMUKH : Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state :

(a) whether Government's attention has been drawn to the news-item captioned "In foreign jails Indian are bound in red tape" appearing in the 'Hindustan times' dated the 8th November, 2001;

(b) whether the families of Indian prisoners, who are more than 6,600, in foreign jails have applied through his Ministry for release of their wards; and

(c) if so, the cases in which his Ministry has helped their early release ?

THE MINISTER OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI JASWANT SINGH) (a) Yes, Sir, the Government has noted the news item.

(b) From time to time the Government receives requests for assistance for the release of Indian prisoners, from foreign jails, from their families and others.

(c) As soon as Indian diplomatic mission is informed of the arrest of an Indian citizen in a foreign country, a request is made by it to the host Government, for seeking consular access. An official of the Mission visits the detainee to ascertain the circumstances leading to the arrest. Where necessary the Mission takes up the matter with the host Government for speedy and fair trial and also for review of the sentence. The prisoners are normally released on completion of their sentences. In deserving cases, our Missions approach the local authorities for remission of sentences.

In Gulf countries, during the holy month of ramadan our Missions send formal requests for Royal Pardon for release of Indian prisoners on humanitarian grounds.

The arrest and release of indian prisoners abroad is a continuous process.

VSNL's investment in American based Company

*353. SHRI C. P. THIRUNAVUKKARASU : Will the Minister of COMMUNICATIONS be pleased to state :

(a) whether VSNL has made investment in an American based company "IRIDIUM LLC" for international satellite communications;

(b) whether the company has been declared as bankrupt;

(c) how much amount was invested by VSNL; and

(d) the steps taken to recover the amount ?

THE MINISTER OF COMMUNICATIONS (SHRI PRAMOD MAHAJAN) : (a) to (c) No, Sir. VSNL has not made any investment in the equity capital of "Iridium LLC". However, VSNL spent Rs. 50 crores during 1998-99 towards setting up facilities for the Gateway commissioned within VSNL premises for Iridium India telecom Limited (IITL) at Pune, which was capitalized by VSNL. IITL was charged by VSNL for operation & Maintenance of these equipments.

(d) Iridium LLC filed for bankruptcy under Chapter 11 of the US Bankruptcy code in 1st August, 1999. VSNL is in the process of identifying alternative use of the equipment acquired by it.

Penalties on FCI Employees

*354. PROF. (SHRIMATI) BHARATI RAY : Will the Minister of CONSUMER AFFAIRS, FOOD AND PUBLIC DISTRIBUTION be pleased to state :

(a) whether arbitrary means are being used by the FCI to recover losses from the employees that occur naturally during storage and transit of foodgrains;

(b) whether the FCI Union has threatened to intensify agitation for unnecessary penalising the employees; and

(c) if so, Government's reaction on their demands?

THE MINISTER OF CONSUMER AFFAIRS, FOOD AND PUBLIC DISTRIBUTION (SHRI SHANTA KUMAR) : (a) to (c) The Food Corporation of India (FCI) makes allowances for storage and transit losses that occur due to factors like driage of moisture, multiple handling, long storage, long distance carriage, trans-shipment, etc. As per the policy circular issued in this Respect, recovery proceedings are to be resorted to only in cases of abnormal losses and action initiated against the delinquent officials under the relevant Staff Regulations.

Consequent upon recoveries being effected in some cases, the concerned employees/Union members approached the Court. Representations were also made to the FCI Management against the recoveries. The Management held